

## A Partial History of Afterlife Beliefs

Daniel M. Ogilvie  
with Amoha Bajaj<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

A majority of people worldwide believe that they and all other human beings are “ensouled” and the majority of soul-believers endorse the idea that souls are released from the body when it ceases to function. For these people, the entrance of the soul into afterlife existence is taken to be a fact; a life-sustaining, life-guiding, fear-reducing, mind-calming, unquestioned, reassuring, sometimes terrifying, “it’s going to happen”, fact.

Given such widespread agreement regarding the importance of the soul in the “now” and in the “hereafter”, it is surprising that the topic is so rarely the source of open public conversation. Perhaps the topic is too sacred, or too personal, or too sensitive, or too controversial or too illusive to become the focus of conscious attention. Another possibility is that some people are so certain about their afterlife beliefs that talking about them would be pointless. But that condition may be changing. As witnessed by the interest generated by a course titled *Soul Beliefs: Causes and Consequences* introduced at Rutgers University in 2010, many students are ready to take the wraps off a topic that normally eludes scrutiny.

A few lectures in the Soul Beliefs course deal with the topic of the onset, evolution, and diversification of afterlife beliefs, but up to now, no reading assignment(s) accompanied these lectures. That’s a problem when students are expected to remember and work with the substance of what is said in lectures. Words spoken in lectures come and go, but written words remain

---

<sup>1</sup> Ms. Bajaj’s comprehensive notes on various chapters contained in *Death and Afterlife: Perspectives of World Religions* (Obayashi, 1992) and the discussions we had about that information in spring, 2011, went a long way in guiding me through Hinduism, Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. I appreciate her contributions to this undertaking.

available for study and review. Hence, **the purpose of this paper is to provide a “hard copy” version of some of the information covered in these afterlife beliefs lectures.**

While there is no lack of written materials on afterlife doctrines promoted by specific religions, and library shelves are packed with scholarly treatises on the mind/body problem, whether or not the soul is separate from the body, and other issues pertaining to afterlife beliefs, until now, nothing of an appropriate size exists that organizes this information and places it under one roof. But beware! The roof I have created is too small to even begin to accommodate such an enormous topic. Operating under the constraints of writing a paper of manageable length means that some (actually, many) matters of monumental importance to the history and diversity of afterlife beliefs are omitted. Nonetheless, I hope the paper accomplishes its intended purpose of expanding the reader’s knowledge about this fascinating topic.

## **Part I**

### Early Religions: A World of Multiple Gods, Spirits and Controlling Agents

Most scholars who have written on the topic agree that religion is an essential element of all human societies. No societies have lasted long without it. I have no reason to quibble with that observation, but one must be cautious about assuming that one component of all religions is belief in afterlife, specifically in the afterlife of the soul. It is likely that afterlife concerns are relatively recent arrivals in the long history of human civilizations.

Where to begin a discussion of the onset of human civilization is a matter of debate among paleontologists. We could start 2.4 million years ago when our *Homo habilis* ancestors (if indeed they were our ancestors) created stone tools. Or maybe we should start 1.4 million years ago with a branch called *Homo erectus* who migrated from the forests of Africa to the African savannas. **Hunting and gathering** was their sole means of survival and, according to

Pritchard et al. (1999), they barely got through the bottleneck of survival having dwindled to perhaps as few as 5,000 individuals at some point in our early history. Summarizing what is thought to be known about this hominid species, Sedikides and Skowronski (2008, p. 87) describe them as “terrible hunters”. They lacked the size, agility, visual acuity, and in-born specialized abilities of the prey they sought and the predators that sought them.

A critical factor involved in their survival was their inclination to form tribes. (Wandering off by oneself in the savanna grasses was not a good idea). Nicholas **Wade** (2009) makes a strong case that these early tribes were **egalitarian**, meaning that people who tried to be leaders of the pack put their own lives in jeopardy. Some other branches of animals that evolved from our common ancestors like chimpanzees and apes operated (and continue to operate) within rigid, top-down structures with dominant males and his minions and a dominant females and her minions in control of the group. But in the early stages of human civilization, **power sharing** appears to have been a key to survival and individuals who attempted to impose their will on the group were likely to be banished or executed.

Early tribes were comprised of relatively small bands of people and internal tribal cohesion was essential for cooperative hunting, food sharing, and success in intertribal warfare. Modern day street gangs have something in common with tribes that roamed the savannas. They don’t like each other and battles are common. The same was the case with roaming gangs on the savannas. The tribes most likely to survive were tribes whose members were so closely connected and committed to each other that they were willing to fight and, if necessary, die for the group.

Rituals appear to have been essential for this sort of bonding to take place. Few secrets of nature had been discovered, so “natural” causes for the abundance or scarcity of food, feast or

famine, rainfall or drought, birth and death were mysteries. Human brains are designed to seek reasons for why things happen or don't happen and if reasons are not apparent, we make them up. Reasons most likely carry to explanatory powers with them and thereby satisfy pre-scientific minds involved the activities of supernatural agents like gods, spirits, ghosts, the sun, the moon, constellations of stars, snakes, ravens, jaguars, and other seen and unseen forces believed to be in control of earthly affairs. After these agents were identified, strategies for influencing them were devised. These strategies included dancing, singing, blood-letting, animal and human sacrifices, and other ritualized practices intended to bring good fortune to the tribe and to prevent it from being the target of supernatural rage.

**Ancestor worship** was a common feature of hunting and gathering tribes. Deceased tribespersons still existed in the minds of their surviving kin and sometimes materialized in nighttime dreams. When not visiting the dreams of the living, they were imagined to exist as spirits residing in trees, high grass, in the sky, under the ground, on mountain tops, occupying the bodies of various animals, or existing in entirely different realms. In many respects, dead ancestors were ideal candidates to be identified as agents capable of both good and evil. An important feature of ancestor worshipping tribes was, and still is in some regions, that **the deceased remain a part of the living world**. The dead, no matter what form their spirits take, were thought to remain very interested and quite influential in tribal affairs. By way of proper burials, sacrifices and gifts, spirits of the dead could be influenced to cure illnesses, increase or decrease the supply of food, and provide the tribe with the courage and cunning to defeat their enemies. In some societies, they could be called upon for advice about how to treat tribespersons who violated the norms of egalitarianism or who were not carrying their share of the burden. In this and other ways, **ancestors were used to preserve the existing social order**.

Ritualized singing and group dancing (sometimes to the point of exhausted delirium and trance states) in honor and celebration of ancestors and various supernatural agents were important occasions for group bonding. These activities provided participants with a strong sense of group membership and, through that membership, a sense of group security and continuity.

I cannot answer the question of whether or not hunter and gatherers believed in a personal soul with afterlife potential. However, I suspect not, at least not until missionaries attempted to introduce the idea in recent centuries. And there is no evidence we know of suggesting that tribesmen looked forward to dying so they could finally get some respect. Living persons existed in bodies, and dead people became spirits. And foremost on the agendas of both the living and the dead was the unity and cohesion of the tribe.

Some hunter and gathering tribes still in existence that have been studied intensively are minimalists in terms of afterlife beliefs. For instance, the **Hadza** of northern Tanzania take death as a matter of due course. People are born, they live for however long they live, they die, and that's it. Burial rites are simple, and beliefs in an afterlife don't seem to exist. J. Woodburn (1982) studied the Hadza during four years of fieldwork and his observations are summarized by Bond (1992). They are described as operating in an “**immediate-return**” system; meaning that stress is placed on the **present-day** activities of gaining food for immediate consumption with minimal attention given to planning for the future. Got food? Eat it now.

The **Pirahas**<sup>2</sup> constitute another example of a hunting and gathering tribe that lives in the “now” and gives little or no thought about life after today, let alone life after death. The Pirahas are comprised of small Indian tribes living on the banks of the Amazon River in Brazil. Daniel **Everett** (2009), a linguist and ethnographer, studied the tribe over the course of three decades and lived among them for a total of 7 years. Everett's primary interest was the tribe's one-of-a-

---

<sup>2</sup> I am grateful to Alice Johnson, DDS, for bringing Everett's book to my attention.

kind language, but, over time, he became equally interested in the Piraha's worldviews as expressed in their words and actions. Here are a few of the striking features of the society

**1. The Pirahas are fiercely egalitarian.** There are no chiefs or appointed leaders. Every member treats all other members as equals. All items of value like canoes, bows and arrows, and food are shared. Nobody is richer or poorer than any other person. There is no interest in collecting material wealth or bringing attention to oneself by constructing a "better" hut or weaving an extraordinary basket. When someone offers an opinion, it is stated as the opinion of the group.

**2. Immediate experience is all that matters.** There is a striking lack of concern about the future among the Piraha. For instance, little attention is given to preserving food. When fish are caught at 3:00AM, members of the tribe are awakened and eat the fish. An astonishing example of the tribe's lack of concern about the future is given when Everett describes an instance when the tribe traded food for a shovel. The shovel was tossed into the river after it was used to dig a grave.

**3. History is of no interest.** All reports of things that are said to have occurred in the near or distant past are ignored. No attention is paid to hearsay assertions. Only eyewitness reports are accepted as facts.<sup>3</sup>

**4. Children are raised to be self-sufficient.** A great deal of emphasis is placed on being strong, hard, and knowing the environment. Children are permitted to play with potentially

---

<sup>3</sup> Daniel Everett was a Christian missionary when he first lived with the Pirahas in 1977. He had been sent by the Moody Bible Institute to learn the Piraha's language well enough to translate the Bible into that language and, in the meantime, do what he could to convert members of the tribe to the Christian religion. Eventually he gave up on introducing Christ to the tribe. One of the hurdles he was not able to overcome was whenever he spoke about Christ, he was asked if he had ever met the man and, if not, did he know anybody who was personally acquainted with Christ. When he informed his inquisitors that neither he nor anyone he knew were personally acquainted with Jesus, they refused to listen to any of his stories. Only eye-witness accounts are taken seriously. The rest is gossip and the Pirahas would have none of that. Eventually, Everett became a nonbeliever himself.

dangerous objects like knives and arrowheads and spears. They are only punished when they injure themselves. In the event of death of a village member, the only acceptable explanation of the death is the person was not strong enough to survive.

**5. “Getting ahead” or improving one’s conditions is not a matter of concern.** The Piraha’s emphasis on living in the present and knowing how to cope with whatever their tough environment has to offer is how they have survived for unknown centuries.

From a modern perspective, the Pirahas unquestionably lack ambition. The idea of “getting ahead” is not an aspect of their worldviews. An important tradeoff according to Everett is they are happy and remarkably content in the context of their challenging conditions of life. Warfare is unknown to them. They are guided by moral principles of fairness and reciprocity and the idea of being created by God is foreign to them. They listen to the spirits with whom they are familiar and “see” every day. As stated earlier, the role of these spirits is to offer guidance for preserving the existing social order.

#### Concluding words about hunting and gathering tribes

We cannot know with any degree of certainty that the Hadza tribe in Africa and the Pirahas of Brazil are modern day examples of ancient hunting and gathering tribes. But they might offer clues about afterlife beliefs prior to the formation of agricultural communities. Extrapolating from what we have learned, hunting and gathering tribes did not believe that people are endowed with souls that are released from the body at the point of death and are rewarded or punished in accordance with how they conducted their lives. It is doubtful that tribes that were so completely oriented to living in the present, tribes that had no penchant for or need to plan for the future, would be capable of imagining themselves living... forever... in the future under better or worse conditions. By “instinct” and training, their purpose was to adhere

to the here and now principles of *group* membership and group survival. Dead (as spirits) or alive, their unquestioned mission was to maintain well-practiced traditions of keeping the tribe together for the sake of individual and group survival

### The Establishment of Agricultural Communities

Conditions of daily living began to change dramatically about 15,000 years ago when agricultural communities started to take shape. Small settlements of farmers and herders became large settlements and gradually egalitarianism was replaced by hierarchical, top-down governing structures. As previously noted, many participants in ritualized hunting and gathering tribal dances (dances that sometimes lasted for days with periodic breaks) entered trance-like states that put them into direct contact with the spirits. The consumption or inhalation of plants that induced hallucinations virtually assured that outcome. These sorts of group activities facilitated group bonding. But bonding within small groups in a large community devoted to growing crops, caring for livestock, and trading goods with other communities became increasingly dysfunctional and other ways had to be found to maintain the social order. A layered social structure was a common solution to governing large numbers of people. **As roles became diversified, priesthoods emerged with the result being that only a few people, members of the priesthood were entitled to be in communication with the gods.** It is of more than passing importance to note that these spiritual leaders typically had privileged access to the ruling elite. Each had the ear of the other. The idea that the “Church” and the “State” could (or should) be separate operations was unthinkable.

Another phenomenon that accompanied the shift from egalitarianism to a more partitioned social structure was a shift in time perspective. Whereas hunting and gathering tribes were intensely focused on the present, by necessity, agricultural communities became future



oriented. One reason for that is obvious. Farming requires planning. Seeds and plants cannot be sown any old time. Memories of what worked in the past guide predictions of what is likely to happen in the future. Herding is also a seasonal activity. What is the size of a manageable herd? Where are the best pastures, and what time of year is most appropriate to visit or leave them? The storage and preservation of food also requires sophisticated forethought.

In a recent paper (Ogilvie, 2012) I argue that thinking about the future often involves projecting an image of oneself into the future and “observing” the actions one takes in an imagined set of circumstances. Certainly hunters and gatherers engaged in mental time travel as they used the skill to predict the arrival of fish or when animals are likely to migrate. But they were unlikely to have been as practiced in the long range, “what if”, thinking as were members of settled communities who were concerned about preserving goods for future consumption and amassing an excess of assets for purposes of trade.

The point here is the more one engages in future thinking, particularly the kind of future thinking that includes projecting images of oneself into the future, the more likely one is to wonder about the fate of that projected image of the self after the body dies.

Of course, I could be mistaken. Hunters and gatherers might have been obsessed about death. Perhaps it was always on their mind. But I argue that such concerns became magnified in larger, future-oriented societies and **some solutions to the problem of death were parlayed into powerful mechanisms for social management.** In common language, the solution was some variation of the following: You will reap an eternity of rewards if you play your cards right in this life. The alternative is an eternity of punishment if you play your cards incorrectly. In other words, be a good citizen by following the dictates from above and you (or your soul) will reap the benefits of doing so in the next life. Step out of line and you are either a goner or

you will suffer for your sins for all eternity. Of course the “dictates from above” were determined by chiefs and their collaborating priests. **It would be difficult to imagine a more effective mechanism for social control.** Nicholas **Wade** summarizes these observations when he writes,

“In the ancestral religion people communed directly with the supernatural world through dreams and trances, not through the mediation of priests. They asked their gods for practical help, such as good hunting, children, or health. In many modern religions priests direct people’s attention toward an afterlife, with instructions to focus their present lives on deeds that will secure rewards beyond the grave. **In short, adherents of the ancestral religions sought to secure survival in the real world; those of modern religions are more focused on salvation in the next.**” (Wade, 2009, pp. 126-127, emphasis ours).

One of the earliest written accounts of the emergence of a concern about the next life is the story of Gilgamesh and the disappointing news given him by the gods that trashed his hopes for immortality.

### Gilgamesh’s Failed Quest

There is a good deal of disagreement on critical issues like what constitutes the soul, where it goes after it is released from the body, what rituals are required to assure its safe passage to eternal life, what actions in this life result in the soul being either punished or rewarded in the next life, etc. Beneath all the debates and uncertainty, one thing seems certain; matters related to the continuation of life after death have occupied the minds of our ancestors at least since the rise of agricultural societies. Just how many thousands of years ago that was is not known due to the lack of written records. But if inscriptions on clay tablets count (they do),

we know that **Gilgamesh**, on one leg of his epic journey, sought the secret of immortal life and was told to give it up because the gods had ordained that human life is only temporary. [See George (1999) for a recent translation of the saga].

Gilgamesh was a **Babylonian king** (a real king by most accounts) who ruled around 2700 BCE. By 2000 BCE he had become the hero of legends written on tablets in the Sumerian language that were widely dispersed in Mesopotamia. So, we know that the search for immortality has been a matter of great interest for at least 4000 years. We also know that the legend of Gilgamesh is not the source of the great religious myths of our time, because the solution to the problem of life after death that Gilgamesh discovered by way of the gods (that there is no life after death for mere humans) was not the kind of solution most people wanted to hear. A more optimistic view on the prospects of afterlife was fairly well established in Ancient Egypt at about the same time that Gilgamesh was king of Uruk, but, as we will see, the passage from death to eternal life is not automatic.

### Ancient Egypt

Ancient Egyptians believed that the person was comprised of three essential elements: The first element is the **body**. The body is the actual physical body. It is unique to each person. The body changes as the person gets older and death is considered to be the last change. The second element is **ba**. Like the body, ba is unique to each person. In modern terms, ba can be thought of as one's personality or character, a composite of all the non-physical things that make the person different from all other people. Your (the reader's) ba would include your memories, your preferences, the manner in which you express your emotions, the "stuff" you know, your intelligence, etc. The third element is **ka**. Ka is the life force. Unlike ba, ka does not represent the individual. It is a universal force, something shared by all living people. In the beginning

the creator made ka and being in possession or not in possession of ka is the difference between being alive and being dead.

When the body dies, both ba and ka are released through the mouth and are thereby separated from the body and depart for the Underworld. However, unless things go poorly, the separation is not permanent and eventually ba, ka, and the body are reunited in the Underworld and resurrected in the form of **Akh**. Akhs, those who successfully make the transition, enter the Underworld of eternal life with the gods. The Underworld, as the word suggests, is located underground where life is conducted in the same way it is conducted above ground with the exception that there is no suffering, no diseases, no poverty, and, importantly, no death. Life is permanent, endless, eternal, in this part of the Underworld. Those who fail to make the transition suffer the fate of becoming “re-dead” with no hope of resurrection.

There are bumps in the road to resurrection. For instance, a prerequisite for safe landing in the Underworld of the gods is good conduct in “this” world prior to death. (As noted a few pages back, this is the first of several instances we will encounter that demonstrate how religions work on behalf of maintaining the social order. Evil-doers don’t stand a chance).

But a good deal of the preparatory work for “akh-hood” was in the hands of the living. First the body had to be properly mummified with all of the organs except the heart removed. Then an elaborate series of rituals, incantations, and ceremonial offerings of food and other items were made in the service of safe passage. The deceased were provided maps of the Underworld and instructions about obstacles and how to overcome them as the day of final judgment drew near.

Although accounts vary (after all, the practices I am describing lasted for over 2500 years), the basic structure of judgment day is as follows. (Keep in mind that the best possible

outcome is when ba, ka, and the body are reunited and take the form of akh). First, ba is summoned to the Hall of Truth, where several gods have gathered. Osiris, the god of the Underworld, would likely be among them. The heart of the deceased is then placed on one end of the scale and a feather on the other end. In the company of various gods, ba, who represents the “essence” of the former person, is required to recite the following lines (only three of several are listed here):

- I have not done falsehood against man.
- I have done no evil.
- I have not impoverished my associates.

The scale remains in perfect balance if ba’s affirmation of the lines is truthful, and a perfectly balanced scale is a prerequisite for the gods to allow ba to direct ka to the body they formerly occupied and thereby enter into the state of akh. But if falsehoods are told, the heart becomes heavy, and scale becomes imbalanced and resurrection is denied.

One feature of the Ancient Egyptian belief system is ba (the Egyptian equivalent to the personal soul) was never conceived of as completely independent from the body. It was not capable of surviving on its own. The radical separation of the soul from the body had to wait for the Early Greeks who took several centuries to perform the conceptual surgery.

### Ancient Greece

Although traces of Ancient Egyptian religion are apparent in some modern day beliefs (e.g., the final judgment of the soul), western ideas were more influenced by ancient Greek thinking than by the lore of ancient Egyptians. My task is to simplify a long and complex story and I do so by focusing on a few central figures.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Rosalie Osmond is our primary guide through ancient Greek philosophy. Her book, *Imagining the Soul: A History* (2003) is rich in information and inspiration.

We begin with the Greek poet, **Homer**, author of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* in the 8<sup>th</sup> Century BCE. Some afterlife beliefs presumably common to that time period in Greece can be extracted from these epic stories. The Greek word associated with the soul was **psyche**, a word linked with the word *psychein*, meaning to blow or breathe. Psyche is breathed into the body at birth and is breathed out at death. But note that the psyche that is breathed out at death is not to be confused with ba or ka that depart from the mouth and have a shot at resurrection in Egyptian mythology. The Greek psyche of Homer's era travels directly to **Hades** where it exists as a **shade**. (The words **shade** and **shadow** are used interchangeably). Hades is a dull, drab, joyless place where there is no hope for a better day. Shadows have no personalities, they don't talk, are extremely stupid, and sometimes take the form of screeching bats. They cease to exist when they are forgotten by the living. This is every person's fate. Hades is the common dumping ground for the righteous, the wicked, the kind-hearted, and the scoundrel. All psyches become shades and that's the end of it.

Things brightened up a bit with **Hesiod**'s description of the **Isles of Blest** ("Blessed" in some translations) in his 7<sup>th</sup> Century BCE work titled *Works and Days*. For the fortunate few, there is an afterlife and it is conducted on the Isles of Blest pretty much as it was conducted on mainland Greece with some important exceptions. Good crops are guaranteed in the lush and fertile fields that are harvested three times a year. Even more enticing than reliable crops is the fact that there is no suffering, no sorrow, and no death on the Isles of Blest. But there is a catch: **only people with the right credentials are admitted to this land of paradise**. As Hesiod imagined it, the good life was only available to heroes who were "killed" in combat in the wars at Thebes and Troy. But instead of actually dying in the fields of battle and ending up as shadows in Hades, these heroes earned immortality by being transported body and soul (although a distinction

between the two had not yet been made) to the Isle of Blest. Not a bad recruiting tool for ancient armed services.<sup>5</sup>

Although there was not much explicit soul-talk by Greek poets and philosophers until Plato dealt with the topic in the 5<sup>th</sup> Century BCE, **Pythagorus** had set the stage for Plato the century before (6<sup>th</sup> Century BCE) by beginning the process of loosening the soul from the grips of the body. Ever the mathematician, he made a distinction between physical objects, the material “stuff” in the world (including one’s body) and non-physical substances. All material things have mathematical properties and abide by certain laws, one of which is no material object can move on its own accord. For instance, a chair cannot turn itself around. If you want a chair to face in a different direction, you, as an external force, must do the work. Another law governing the material world is two objects cannot occupy the same physical space at the same time. (Try to put two chairs in exactly the same physical location and you will immediately experience the problem). But neither law applies to psyches. Psyches are self-moving. They do not require external assistance to move about. You want to look in a different direction? Do it. Your soul will give you a hand. And, from a certain perspective, two psyches can be thought of as being able to occupy the same space at the same time. For instance, when you “read someone’s mind”, it might be said that two minds temporarily share the same space. Whatever the actual case might

---

<sup>5</sup> For the most part, I resist temptations to cite instances when a mythological theme in one culture pops up in a different culture many centuries later. But the following instance of an overlapping theme is too rich to ignore. It requires us to skip ahead from Hesiod’s time (7<sup>th</sup> Century BCE) to **Norse Mythology** in the Middle Ages (roughly 11<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> Century CE). **Vahalla** is one of the four afterlife destinations in Norse mythology. Like the Isles of Blest, it is a male preserve, reserved for brave warriors who died in battle. However, unlike the Isles of Blest, Vahalla was not a farming community. Instead, its occupants put on armor each morning, fought all day until evening, dined on a mythic pig (a pig that was resurrected each day and recycled for all time), and drank vast quantities of mead without getting hung over. Although Vahalla does not fit most pictures of heaven, the prospect of endless fighting was so enticing that some Vahalla hopefuls intentionally fell on their swords so they would not miss out on the opportunity to engage in never-ending, daily routine of warfare. (I acknowledge Jeremy Zachowski for educating me on Norse Mythology).

be, it was apparent to Pythagorus that the laws that govern the material world do not extend into the non-material world of psyches.

Nobody knows what Pythagorus actually thought, and whether or not he even existed is a matter of some debate, but a great deal has been attributed to him including the idea that he was influenced by 5<sup>th</sup> Century Orphic and Dionysian resurrection myths and was impressed by shamans whose psyches could be disengaged and re-engaged from their bodies when they returned from remarkable voyages. The idea that psyches could “transmigrate” from one body to another body (including to the bodies of animals) is also attributed to Pythagorus. Whatever the actual case might have been, in truth or in legacy, a lot was left on the plate for Plato to work with, and, depending on one’s perspective, we either have benefited from or been cursed by his dramatic conclusions.

In my view, **Plato**’s most far-reaching observations in terms of their religious implications are the following declarations.

- **The soul is a divine creation.**
- **The soul is immortal.**
- **The body and the soul are separate entities.**
- **All souls pre-existed in other bodies.**
- **The soul is perfect but that perfection is contaminated by having to be encased in the body.**

Put bluntly, Plato, more than any other historical figure prior to his time, introduced the world to full-fledged, mind/body **dualism**. Two entities: the body and the soul. Bodies come and go. They are born and then they die. But souls are immortal. Souls fall into bodies at birth and move into other bodies when the body encasement dies. According to some of Plato’s



musings (e.g. *Phaedo*), the **relationship between a soul and the body it occupies is frequently strained**. In general, souls do not like being in bodies, in part because they are contaminated by them, and in part because they would much rather be free.

Plato modified this one-against-one struggle 20 years later in *The Republic* when he divided the soul into two elements: a **rational element** (governed by higher **reason**) and an **irrational element** (governed by our lower **animalistic appetites**). He also proposed a third element: the **spirit** or **will**. The spirit gives the person a choice by either siding with reason or with irrational appetites. The only way a soul can end the cycle of reincarnations is to operate in the rational sphere of **Pure Reason** because **Truth and Beauty** can only be obtained through pure reason. But alas, pure reason is a difficult condition to maintain because it is constantly under the threat of being dragged down by animalistic passions of the body (e.g., lust, envy, pleasure, pain, fear, hope, etc). According to Plato, souls most likely to enter into and remain in the sphere of truth and beauty are the souls of philosophers. Souls that rise to that level have reached perfection and are not recycled. So, if you want be the container of such a soul, consider majoring in philosophy.

Plato emphasized the struggle between the material body and the ethereal soul. The body could not operate without soul and it was nearly impossible for the soul not to be contaminated by the body. As we will see, the tension between bodily desires and maintaining the purity of the soul subsequently became a central feature of Christian and Islamic religions. But before we deal with this and related matters, I will use Plato's ideas about multiple incarnations of the soul as a springboard to introduce some features of **Hinduism**; a religion that promotes beliefs that are compatible with Plato's notion that souls released from dead bodies are reincarnated into new bodies. The cycle is terminated only after much-travelled souls achieve perfection. This idea

pre-dated Plato by several centuries in the northern regions of India and is one of many instances of the dispersion of ideas over long distances and long periods of time. A central feature of Hinduism is reincarnation of the soul with the ultimate goal of ending the cycle of rebirth.

### Hinduism<sup>6</sup>

Unlike Judaism, Islam, and Christianity, Hinduism is not a single religion. It is an amalgam or synthesis of three religious traditions. There is no specific founder or clear time of origin. It is a long term accumulation of a number of religious views into a commonly accepted system of salvation. **The ultimate goal in Hinduism is to seek release from the cycle of rebirths and attain union with the Ultimate Reality.** This union results in the final release of the soul from the continuous recycling into various physical forms. **Stop!** I recommend that readers not acquainted with Hinduism go back and read the last six sentences. Notice that no **single god is mentioned**; only something called Ultimate Reality. Also notice that salvation is a long-term process that involves repeated re-births. As we will see in Part II, **the “Western” monotheistic perspective proposes one god, one path to salvation, and only one lifetime to get there. Hinduism proposes many lives and three alternative paths to becoming united with Ultimate Reality.** The three paths are: Path of Ritual Salvation, The Upanisadic Goal of Release from Rebirth (also known as Path of Knowledge), and Path of Devotion. Since people are in different states in their progress toward salvation, everyone is free to select the path most suited to their religious needs.

Before describing these paths, the reader should know that it is difficult to describe these paths to salvation using words and concepts familiar to most Westerner ears. That, of course, is one of the problems with trying to cover so much territory in a single paper. The best that can be done in such a limited space is to give you a “sense” of the different paths and to bring your

---

<sup>6</sup> This summary of Hinduism is largely drawn from the writings of Thomas J. Hopkins. See Hopkins (1992).

attention to the fact that the first two paths are more likely to be followed by members of the higher “castes” of social elites in Hindu communities. The first path requires a considerable amount of family resources (sons being a prerequisite resource) and the second path, the most rigorous of the three, requires sons to live their lives as celibate Vedic students from ages 12 to 20. The third path is primarily followed by people in the heavily populated lowest caste of Hindu societies.

**The Path of Ritual Salvation** emphasizes sacrificial fires that are accompanied by chanted hymns to deities to whom sacrifices are being made. These collections of hymns formed rituals of the **Veda, a collection of ancient hymns and chants** that eventually came under the control of priests known as **Brahmans**. The Brahman had 2 principles: ritual knowledge (Veda) and ritual action (karma). Brahman was responsible for transmitting knowledge (veda) through ritual action (performing rituals). It was believed that any ritual action, performed by any individual, had consequences at the cosmic level. For example, the sacrificial fires are effective because they combine ritual knowledge and action, producing results at the cosmic level directly. The effects of these ritual actions stay with an individual, beyond the cremation of a physical body and continue to determine an individual’s afterlife.

The afterlife of an individual depends on the ritual performances of one’s family members AND the deceased’s own actions (karma), as mentioned above. Afterlife is a family concern because according to the religion, only a married male householder can perform death rituals for family members and ancestors. And only a continuing family line can secure the welfare of the departed. Therefore, it is essential that sons be available to maintain succession of ritual duties so that the deceased can enter The World of Fathers (or heaven). Entrance into The

World of Fathers (through karma, knowledge and rituals) prevents the need for the soul to be recycled.

The second pathway in Hinduism is **The Upanisadic Goal of Release from Rebirth** path (or the Path of Knowledge). This path distinguishes between what is permanent and what is not. At the cosmic (or universal) level, the permanent reality is the Brahman. At the personal level, the “self” or “atman” is the permanent reality that underlies each person and is the conscious Being. In contrast, the entire world is transient at every level because it is regulated by thought and desire. Desirous action, or karma, is what brings the transient world into existence and perpetuates it. The goal of the Upanisads, as in the previous path, is to escape from the cycle of birth and rebirth. This is possible by giving up all desires through realizing that one’s atman is not part of the transient world but in fact, is identical to the unchanging reality of Brahman. As mentioned above, this path is the most arduous. For openers, a son must leave his families to study with Vedic teachers. More trying than that is he becomes a forest dweller in later life and finally denounces all connections with society and severs all family ties.

The third path is the **Path of Devotion**. The previous 2 paths rely on education, knowledge, and at least some degree of wealth, but not on divine assistance. **The Path of Devotion requires a follower to select and worship a deity.** Complete devotion to the selected deity along with appropriate sacrifices and renunciations enables the follower to move closer to goal of being released from re-birth. This is a **polytheistic** path because there are multiple gods and goddesses available for selection. For instance, there is **Vishnu** the protector; **Shiva** the destroyer; **Yoga** the cosmic Lord of the dance; and **Devi**, a goddess that appears in a variety of names and forms. Proper devotion to these deities results in their bestowing grace on the follower and that improves the prospects of a more favorable incarnation the next time around.

## Part II

### From Polytheism to Monotheism

Modern Judaic, Christian, and Islamic religions feature one God. Since the Christian and Islamic religions were derived from Judaism, this one god is the same god for all three faiths. The worship of one and only one god is called **monotheism**, and, according to Robert **Wright** (2009), there was nothing like the sort of monotheistic thinking that permeates western religions until the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE. Prior to then, **polytheism** reigned with multiple deities running the show. Their names and specific responsibilities depended on one's culture. There were wind gods, rain gods, ocean deities that controlled the tides, gods of happiness and gods of doom, death, and destruction. There were gods and goddesses of love, gods of war, deities of good times and bad. There were household goddesses, fertility gods, gods of health, and separate gods that reigned over almost every conceivable chunk of nature. There were big gods, like sun gods, and smaller deities like the eight Egyptian deities that oversaw lungs, liver, stomach, and intestines (two gods per organ).<sup>7</sup> Recall that Gilgamesh was informed that the "gods" (not God) had ordained that human life is only temporary. When ba and ka were reunited with the body in Egyptian mythology, the restored person joined the "gods", not God, in the Underground of eternal life. All of these gods, goddesses, spirits, angels, and deities, including members of the ancestral world of hunters and gatherers were integral parts of nature. Some were whimsical, moody and difficult to control. Others were open to negotiations, particularly when gifts and sacrificial offerings were part of the deal. But all that changed upon the arrival of a single Israelite god named **Yahweh**. Kaufmann, an authority of on the history of Judaism religion, writes: "**Yahweh does not live in the processes of nature, he controls them.**" (Kaufman, 1972, p. 70).

---

<sup>7</sup> Shafer et al., p. 54.

Yahweh did not suddenly arrive on a specific date in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE. It took centuries for the idea of a single god, a one and only *true* god, to take hold. But when it did, it was the source of a monumental shift in the landscape of beliefs and became the foundation of modern-day Judaic, Islamic, and Christian religions.

Before ancient Israelites elevated Yahweh to his position of absolute supremacy, he operated at the same level as other gods of competing nations. Like Assur, the Assyrian god, and Marduk, the head god of the Babylonians, Israelites relied on Yahweh to see them through tough times, to authorize war, to guide them to victory, or to recommend restraint. Struggles between nations were viewed as struggles between gods. A major victory implied “Our god is wiser, or more clever, or more powerful than your god”, and losers were left to wonder why their god let them down. But that story is too simplistic. A more complicated story is told by Robert Wright.

Wright emphasizes the “on the ground” political and economic realities involved in the gradual emergence of a single god (Wright, 2009). He tells a multilayered story of the role of early commerce in the movement from polytheism to monotheism. One of his premises is that it was good to have as many trading partners as possible for the economic health and well-being of the nations involved. But that principle remained true only as long as trading nations mutually benefitted by the arrangement. When all sides benefit, it is easy to overlook differences in belief systems. “They worship Baal, the god of fertility. We worship Yahweh. But who cares as long as our trading arrangement is going well.” But what happens when things don’t go smoothly? What happens when one nation invades and manages to occupy another nation? The leaders of a conquering nation have a choice. One option is to permit the conquered people to continue to worship their god(s) and thereby acknowledge that gods other than one’s own exist: a condition called **monolatry**. Another option is to ban the worship of all gods other than one’s own.

Wright shows how these options are played out in the Old Testament. Although religious tolerance is evident in some portions of the Old Testament, an angry god, a god who insists on being the only god, a god intent on blood and vengeance carries the day.

Yahweh's rise to ultimate power in the minds of Jewish theologians did not come about because ancient Jews had always been successful in protecting their lands or taking over the territory of their enemies. Instead, Wright proposes that his elevation was the result of major *defeats*. The Babylonians had conquered Israelite lands and had belittled their god by destroying his temple in Jerusalem. Prior to that, the Assyrians had stripped the temple of its treasures. In other words, Yahweh rose through the ranks after he had taken it on the chin. The central thrust of Wright's theory about how that came about is as follows.

Jewish theologians and intellectuals spent many years in self-imposed or enemy-imposed exile and had plenty of time to ponder why Yahweh appeared to be such a weakling. Their solution changed the world. **Instead of Yahweh being one among many gods, he was in charge of the entire show.** Marduk, the god of the Babylonians, and all the other "gods" of other nations were Yahweh's puppets. A new understanding of history emerged from the deliberations of these exiles when they concluded that Yahweh and Yahweh alone had orchestrated the setbacks, the defeats, and the changing fortunes of ancient Israelite tribes. Yahweh arranged for their temple to be plundered and their people slaughtered because they angered him by continuing to worship other gods. He arranged their surprising victories to show them and all other nations who is boss.

Wright encourages us to think about it this way. Events in the ancient, nation against nation, world might have given people the impression that victories and defeats depended on which deities had been most crafty or powerful at the time of a given battle. But all that changes

when an all-knowing, all-powerful deity is injected into the picture. The acceptance of this transformative idea that an unseen puppeteer had been controlling the movements of the on-stage deities resulted in the most enduring myth of all time: a myth that took shape over hundreds of years and filled the pages of The Old Testament. This god of the Bible makes all other gods irrelevant; figments of imaginations that perhaps echoed the imaginations of hunter and gathering tribes. This god, this one and only true god, is a demanding god who operates with a long-range plan. But before we get to that and how that plan varies in the hands of the three major monotheistic religion, we need to face the fact that Plato's one-soul/multiple-bodies is a poor foundation for the sort of monotheistic thinking that began to carry the day.

#### Goodbye Plato, Welcome Aristotle

The shifting of national and religious loyalties were regular occurrences during and prior to Plato's declaration that the soul is immortal and moves from one body to the next until it reaches the final state of truth and beauty. That philosophic position, particularly the part about souls bouncing from one body to another, was a poor fit for the emergent one god only perspective. A better fit was found in **Aristotle** (circa 384-332 BCE), Plato's famous student. Recall Plato's notion that the soul wants to be free from the captivity of the body. Instead of following Plato's lead and emphasizing the soul's hostile relationship with the body, Aristotle stressed the idea that the soul is what makes a body a body. Osmond (2003) summarizes the primary differences between Plato and Aristotle when she writes, "Where Plato saw the body as a hindrance to the soul, a necessary but unfortunate encumbrance in this life, Aristotle asserted that their interdependence was a necessary good" (p. 29).

For Aristotle, the soul was not something that dropped into a body on its way to another body in its search for Truth and Beauty, or in the case of Hinduism, Ultimate Reality. For him



the soul provides every living organism the floor plan of what it is to become. Aristotle referred to the soul as **the formative principle** of every living thing.<sup>8</sup> Souls cannot exist without bodies and bodies cannot become bodies in the absence of souls. The soul of a rose makes it a rose. The soul of a lion makes that creature a lion. Consider a chicken egg. It contains the potential of a chicken but that potential cannot be realized until the soul within it orchestrates successive stages of embryonic development and creates a chicken. Virtually everything is ensouled in Aristotle's way of thinking. He even attributed souls to stories when he made reference to the "soul of a tragedy".

All souls, both human and non-human, enable the organism to respond to the features of their environments that might impinge on their survival. That's what souls do and they do it automatically. No thought is involved. What makes human souls unique, what separates us from all other creatures, is the soul of a human contains a **rational element** that enables us to reason and think abstractly. **Nous** is the term Aristotle gave to the highest part of the rational soul. Aristotle stressed that nous thinks in pictures and when it is set free, it is timeless, divine, and immortal. It's hard to wrap one's mind around that notion and centuries of debate about what Aristotle meant by it has not settled the matter. Nonetheless, the "take home" message of this discussion is this: More so than Plato's "souls on the move from body to body" perspective, **Aristotle's grounding of the soul in the material body was philosophically more compatible with the one-god-only/one-soul-only perspective of the Old Testament and even more compatible with later Christian and Islamic beliefs that emerged in later centuries.** The integration of the soul with the body to create a whole person is a stronger foundation for a belief system that implies or explicitly states that the fate of one is intertwined with the fate of the

---

<sup>8</sup> Aristotle's perspective was much more compatible with modern day understanding of genes and DNA in designing bodies than was Plato's vision of the body and soul in constant conflict.

other. Look at it this way: If the body is perceived as a temporary container for a wandering soul, the body is no longer relevant to any afterlife concerns after the soul has bid its farewell. But if there is any hint that afterlife involves a body/soul reunion, or that the fate of the soul is contingent upon the role it played in the life of the body, one best pay careful attention to the relationship between the body and the soul in real life because what is done in *this life* (the one and only life we've got) determines the quality of life in the next one and the next life will last forever. The best way to assure a happy body/soul afterlife reunion or to assure that whatever represents you in the afterlife arrives in paradise is to take directions from the one true god as they have been delivered by his various prophets.

Before we turn to how this gets played out in the three major religions in the Western hemisphere (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), I want it to be clear that I am not saying that without Aristotle one-god/one-soul religions could not have evolved. All I am saying is it appears to me that Aristotle's ideas about soul/body unity and the immortality of *nous* provided a more solid philosophical foundation for monotheism than did Plato's ideas about body-to-body migration of souls.

### Judaism<sup>9</sup>

Writing about early and contemporary Judaic beliefs about death and afterlife is a challenge because there is no universally agreed-upon "Jewish" position on the topic. One simply cannot state, "This is what Jews believe about afterlife" and expect the statement to go unchallenged. Unlike afterlife beliefs of Muslims and Christian, commonly shared beliefs about afterlife are not imprinted on Jewish minds. Nonetheless, as we will see, they planted some seeds that became dogma for both Christian and Islamic religions.

---

<sup>9</sup> We used chapters written by Mendenhall (1992) and Goldenberg (1992) as primary guides through religion in the Jewish tradition.

One reason for the vagueness of Jewish positions on immortality and its partner life after death is these matters are not dealt with in the Hebrew Bible. The topic does not come up in the first five chapters of the Old Testament where we are informed that in the beginning God created the earth, molded man from clay, and animated him with the breath of life. At death, the person becomes “a dead breath”, the body returns to dust, and the spirit returns to God. In addition to becoming dust, the dead (more likely the shadows of the dead) descend to **Sheol**, a place where the “dead are dead” (See Mendenhall, 1992). Sheol, like Homer’s Hades, is a dark, dreary, shadowy pit where most people are “gathered to their people”. The exceptions to that rule are wicked people whose dust is prevented from resting in the vicinity of their kin. Other than that, nothing happens. All that’s left is the intermingling of the residues of former human beings. But the belief that dead people are dead and that’s the end of the story did not endure the test of time as other positions about life beyond the confines of Sheol were articulated.

Before reviewing these alternative perspectives, one theme had been consistent throughout the ages of Jewish thought: **What matters most is *this life*, the life currently being lived**. A more accurate way to state that is: “*In general* what matters most is this life, the life currently being lived” because there are plenty of Jews who care deeply about afterlife. But as a rule most Jews faithful to their traditions, Jews who celebrate their holidays in ways specified by their laws, Jews who structure their lives around their religious commandments, Jews who serve their people, Jews who fulfill their duties to G-d do so *not* to assure themselves of a comfortable afterlife, but to preserve a tradition that they consider to be more important than their personal fate in an afterlife. Individuals come and go, but the Jewish tribe and its traditions are to be maintained at all costs. The consequences of abiding by Jewish laws set forth centuries ago have more of an impact on this life than on what happens in the next life. In sum, **the tribe and its**

**customs must be preserved.**<sup>10</sup> Keep this “take home” message in mind as we describe some variations of the stuck forever in Sheol that emerged over time.

The Book of Daniel became part of the Jewish Bible relatively late in its evolution. According to most Biblical scholars it contains the one and only passage in the Old Testament that refers to afterlife, to wit: “And many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life and some to reproaches and everlasting abhorrence.” (Daniel 12:2).

This passage was subsequently used to work out a solution to a major dilemma. How did it come about that some polytheistic Jews who disavowed Yahweh and remained true to their pagan gods prospered, while many faithful Yewists lived in grinding poverty? Where is this G-D of justice? Equally disconcerting was the fact that when Jews were slaughtered in battles with the Babylonians or some other tribe, both Yehwists *and* Jewish pagans suffered the same fate. Surviving Yehwists noticed that. Why adhere to a one god only belief system when, at the end of the day, only scraps of food on the plates of starving Yewists children and lavish feasts were thrown by pagan-worshipping Jewish merchants? The solution was that just rewards and just punishments will be distributed in the next life.

Different schools of thought emerged that described how that would work. For instance, the School of Shammai endorses the idea that there will be a Day of Judgment when righteous people are separated from the scoundrels. The righteous will be sent to **Gan Eden** (Garden of Eden, a.k.a. as Heaven). Wicked people go straight to **Gehinnom** (hell) and an in-between group comprised of people who were neither purely good nor purely evil are also sent to Gehinnom where they will be punished for 12-months. Fully cleansed, they will be admitted to

---

<sup>10</sup> I once spoke with a Jewish scholar on the matter of religion. This individual was in his 80's and was undergoing treatment for cancer. He told me that he had been an atheist since early adulthood and that was a matter of no consequence. “But, Dan,” he went on to say, “I sure do love my tribe.”

Gan Eden. But punishment for the truly bad ones in Gehinnon is unrelenting and only comes to an end when they are annihilated.

It is important to note that School of Sahmmi's position on afterlife represents but one branch of a multi-branched religion. Most past and present rabbinical scholars carefully avoid dogma. They are quick to point out that speculations about afterlife are just that – speculations. Nobody speaks from experience. A Jewish colleague of mine whose knowledge of Judaism runs deep proclaims, “We don’t talk much about Heaven and Hell. It’s not that important to most Jews.” Making an obvious reference to Christians, he went on to say, “But we’ve had to live with you guys for so many centuries that we know the language.”

### Christianity

In summer 2011, Rob Bell, a celebrity in the ranks of evangelical ministers, created a windstorm of opposition among his peers by releasing a book (Bell, 2011) that challenges traditional Christian views about heaven, hell, and eternal damnation. The primary source of the uproar was Bell's position that an all-loving God would not consign billions of non-Christians to eternal suffering in hell. The idea that only a select few Christians will spend forever in a peaceful, joyous place called heaven while the rest of humanity spends forever in torment and punishment in hell with no chance for anything better is deemed “misguided and toxic” by Bell. Traditionalists accused Bell of heresy. One spokesman for the traditional view, Justin Taylor,<sup>11</sup> wrote, “It is unspeakably sad when those called to be ministers of the Word distort the gospel and deceive the people of God with false doctrine” and accused Bell of “moving farther and farther away from anything resembling biblical Christianity.” Equally appalling in the eyes of other evangelical ministers was Bell's suggestion that everybody, irrespective of their religious

---

<sup>11</sup> Justin Taylor is vice president of Crossway, a Christian publisher in Wheaton, Ill. His statements were quoted in the New York Times (<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/05/us/05bell.html>)

beliefs, eventually ends up in heaven. Other critics focused on what they perceived to be Bell's denial of hell as a realm of unabated torture for sinners and nonbelievers. They fear that denying the role of hell in the afterlife plays havoc with a fundamental ingredient of the church.

The essential features of Christian afterlife beliefs cannot be found in the New Testament. As Keck (1992) observes, "...the New Testament contains not a single chapter that summarizes the Christian view" (p. 83). In fact, since chapters in the New Testament were written by many people over a period of hundreds of years, the book contains many contradictions that have taken theologians centuries to iron out. Catholicism dominated Christianity throughout the Middle-Ages. Protestantism emerged at the end of the Middle-Ages, largely due to protests against certain practices of the Mother Church. For instance, **Martin Luther** (1483-1540 CE), a leading figure in the Protestant Revolution, objected to the practice of the church receiving payments from parishioners to reduce the amount of time either they or their loved ones would spend in purgatory being cleansed of their sins. The Protestant Revolution resulted in the rise and proliferation of a host of protestant denominations. Despite the split with the Catholic Church and the proliferation of different versions of the Christian faith, all members of Christendom seem to agree on the following premises:

- **People are born into a world of sin.** Several of St. Paul's contributions to the Bible deal with this topic. In his view, God originally created humans to be pure, innocent, and immortal. He did not create us to sin. But his first creation, Adam, with the assistance of Eve, did exactly that. They disobeyed God's explicit instructions to avoid eating the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge. Adam's sin polluted the world forever and death became our common fate. We are not born to sin (although we inevitably will sin). **The critical point is everyone is already a sinner at birth because all are victims of Adam's Original Sin.** The ritual of

**baptism** is designed to cleanse the soul from inherited sin. But baptism alone does not guarantee salvation.

- **The only way to salvation is through Jesus Christ.** Although the “wages” of sin is death, John the Baptist declared there was a way to avoid that fate when he wrote: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:18). People who accept Jesus as their personal savior are reborn into a new life in this life and into an eternal life of bliss in the next life. Keck (1992) stresses the idea that re-birth in this life involves transforming the “old self” into a “new self” that is committed to the teachings of and resurrection of Christ.

- **There will be a Day of Final Judgment.** There are different versions of the final day (or days) of judgment. For instance in the **Apocalypse** according to John, Christ will return for a final battle with Satan. The battle will last for 1000 days and will end with Satan’s defeat. After Satan is disposed of, all the living and dead are gathered together and final, Heaven or Hell, judgments are made. Irrespective of the details, an essential element of Christianity is belief in a final day of reckoning.

- **The consequence of not being redeemed is eternal damnation.** There are two deaths. One, the death of the body, is unavoidable. The second death can be averted by believing in Jesus and following his path to resurrection. Biblical interpreters vary in their visions of the second death. The mild form is being excluded from being in the presence of God. The harsh form is eternal damnation in the fiery pit of hell.

- **The consequence of salvation is everlasting life in heaven.** Heaven is the final destination for all people who accept Christ as their personal savior. Most Christian churches preach that the soul rejoins the body at resurrection time. Immortality seems to be in store for

the whole self. Although opinions vary and some take the position that the final form of an immortal being will be a “spiritual self”, the most widely accepted model is Christ whose body and soul were intact when he rose to heaven.

### Islam

Given the common “Abrahamic” origins of all three major Western religions, one should not be surprised by overlapping beliefs. Indeed Islamic and Christian afterlife beliefs are similar in several respects. The existence of heaven and hell are fundamental beliefs in both religions and both are confident that a Day of Reckoning will occur when everyone will go before God and be judged according to how they had lived their lives. The righteous will go to heaven and the non-righteous will be sent to hell.

Like Christians, Muslims believe:

- **There is no God but God.**
- **Everything in the universe was brought into existence by God.**
- **All things that have come from God will return to God.**
- **The only people who will be resurrected will be those who believe in Him and conduct their lives according to His Words as recorded by Muhammad in the Koran**

Note that a crucial and consequential difference between Christian and Islamic perspectives is Christians believe that Heaven is open only to people who accept Jesus Christ as their savior. Muslims believe that Jesus was one of many prophets, 120,000 all told, but was not the true hero of the Second Coming. **Muhammad is the final prophet** sent by God to remind people why he created them and what he expects in return. God’s message was recorded in the **Koran** (frequently spelled **Qu'ran**). Another difference between the two religions is **Muslims do not share the Christian belief that all are born sinful. Instead, everyone is born pure.**



God created human beings because he wanted to share with us the bounties and benefits of existence. To this end, he endowed each individual with unlimited potentials to be realized during the course of a lifetime. When the soul that has realized its true nature is resurrected, it faces a Loving and Compassionate God. But people who have forgotten why God created them and have ignored their responsibilities will come into the presence of a Severe and Wrathful God.

No two people are alike in their attributes and everyone needs God's (Allah's) guidance in finding their paths. Finding and remaining on one's path requires discipline, adherence to the laws of personal and spiritual conduct set forth in the Koran and the Hadith<sup>12</sup>, and constant nurturing of one's connection with the Creator. Although God is unknowable, his will is made known to Muslims who seek it and understand that everything is ultimately connected to Him.

According to one account of Islamic afterlife beliefs (Chittick,1992), the soul leads an independent existence after the death of the body and does so until the Day of Resurrection when the body and soul are reassembled. Here are some of the details of the soul's voyage.

On the first night in the grave, the dead are visited by two angels who question them about their beliefs. Their souls will be put into "good or bad situations" according to their answers. The "veil" (meaning the body) that has hidden the soul from view is removed and the soul manifests its true form. It is easy to hide thoughts and feelings behind a body made of clay. But all is laid bare when the soul is revealed. This takes place in an imaginal realm of existence in which the soul comes into sharp focus. Sacred texts refer to this imaginal world as the **interworld** in which souls take on shapes that symbolize their past deeds and misdeeds. The interworld is like a dream world and dreams are taken as apt representations of what was and

---

<sup>12</sup> The sayings of The Prophet Muhammad.

prognosticators of what will be. Incomplete souls can take on animal forms that are dominated by negative qualities. For instance, the famous Islamic theologian, al-Ghazali, wrote:

On the Day of Resurrection, meanings are bared. Then form takes on the color of meaning. If the person had been dominated by passion and greed, he will be seen on that day in the form of a pig. If he was dominated by anger and aggressions, he will be seen in the form of a wolf.<sup>13</sup>

The interworld extends from the period of death up to the Day of Resurrection when the individual enters either heaven or hell. In the meantime, the soul gets a foretaste of what's to come. Some authorities compare the time spent in the grave to the time a fetus spends in the womb.<sup>14</sup> Like a fetus that undergoes growth and transformation in the womb, the soul undergoes growth and transformation in the interworld. These changes are based on its previous performances in the “real” world. The form souls take on the Day of Resurrection determine if they are destined for paradise or are headed for dreadful trials and tribulations. Some of Muhammad's sayings imply that the Day of Resurrection lasts for a thousand years. At the end of that “day” people are divided into two groups. One group goes to the Garden of Paradise and the others go to the Fires of Darkness where they are forever separated from their Creator.

### Concluding Thoughts

This paper began with descriptions of ancient attempts to control phenomena that were beyond the reach of understanding by pre-scientific knowledge. Gods, spirits, demons, deceased ancestors, and external agents of many sorts were invented as explanations for births, deaths, the availability or scarcity of food, catastrophic floods, solar and lunar eclipses, rising and falling tides, tribal victories and defeats and many other occurrences that are no longer mysteries.

---

<sup>13</sup> Quoted by Chittick (1992) p. 136.

<sup>14</sup> See Chittick, p. 137.

Rituals that involved group activities were created to appease supernatural agents and group bonding was one of the crucial side-effects of engaging in these ceremonies. The survival of one's tribe was essential to the survival of the members of that tribe.

For many people, tribal membership is as important today as it was many thousands of years ago. Although a person's religious affiliation might not be as singular in terms of marking one's identity as it was in past centuries, being a Jew, a Catholic, a Unitarian, a Muslim, or an atheist still makes an enormous difference in sorting out who belongs to which "tribe".

The paper describes a shift in social structures that emerged when growing crops and managing livestock replaced hunting and gathering as the principle mode of survival. Large settlements became less egalitarian and more totalitarian with the rise of chiefdoms, rulers, and other agents of social control. Priests and prophets became important members of the ruling class and that marked a change in strategies of social control.

The invention of monotheism combined with the separation of the soul from the body resulted in one of the most powerful mechanisms of mass social control ever witnessed. Now people needed to behave themselves for two reasons. One was for the well-being of society. The other was for their personal well-being for all eternity.

This paper ends with descriptions of afterlife beliefs in three of the world's major religions. These are partial descriptions and that is fitting because the entire paper is billed as a *partial* history of afterlife beliefs. Although the paper covers a good deal of territory, it's humbling to know that so much territory remains untouched. A prime example is the fact that Buddhism is not even mentioned. It is unforgivable to ignore the world's third or fourth most popular religion. In time, this and other omissions will be corrected<sup>15</sup>.

---

<sup>15</sup> In addition to being troubled by omissions, I am equally concerned about misrepresenting the "facts" as they are known by specialists on the topics I have covered. It is likely that some readers are a good deal more

Finally, throughout this paper, I have endeavored to convey the idea that religions have *evolved* in ways that enabled people to adapt to their circumstances and make sense of their lives. That evolutionary process did not suddenly stop. It's ongoing. Some beliefs that have become hardened will eventually soften up and other beliefs will take their place. But as we've seen so many times, that takes time and the process can be grueling. For instance, it took centuries for Copernicus's observation that the sun, not Earth, is the center of our solar system to be accepted. A similar phenomenon is evident today when science challenges traditional dualism. Western religions rely on the belief that the soul and the body are separate and resist evidence that most likely that's not the case. In this and other spheres, our greatest challenge will be how to deal with Absolutism. People on all sides of an argument who are absolutely certain that what they believe is true are fully capable of engaging in "willful ignorance". As Carse (2008) observes, beliefs can be excuses to stop thinking. There are so many "truths" to be discovered, so many things we don't know, that willful ignorance of explanations and worldviews other than one's own can result in potentially explosive stalemates.

So we find ourselves in a bit of a bind. Millions of people believe that their version of God is correct, that their pathway to eternal life is the only pathway. Other versions and pathways are wrong, so terribly wrong that radical leaders of opposing camps stand ready to mobilize tribal support to defeat the enemies of God by using nuclear weapons and permanently poison our little spot in the universe in the process.

---

knowledgeable than I am about one or another topic I have written about and are aghast by how badly I have distorted the "truth". I welcome your criticisms and corrections. But know in advance that references to *published* literature must accompany corrections. Hearsay anecdotes and tidbits picked up on the Internet will not be helpful.

Susskind (2008) issues a similar warning when he writes, "Those two genies of wish fulfillment -- messianic fervor and technological power -- have spotted each other. If they come together, the world, as it is now known, will no longer exist" (p. 397).

Let us work on preventing that from happening.

References

- Bell, R. (2011) *Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived*. NY: HarperOne.
- Block & J. Parry, eds., *Death and the Regeneration of Life*. NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Bond, G. C. (1992) *Living with the spirits: Death and afterlife in African religions*. In H. Obayashi, Ed., *Death and Afterlife*. Westport Connecticut: Praeger.
- Carce, J. P. (2008). *The Religious Case Against Belief*. NY: The Penguin Press.
- Chittick, W. C. (1992). "Your Sight Today is Piercing": The Muslim Understanding of Death and Afterlife. In H. Obayashi, Ed., *Death and Afterlife*. Westport Connecticut: Praeger Press, pp. 125-142.
- Everett, D. L. (2008). *Don't Sleep, There are Snakes: Life and Language in the Amazonian Jungle*. NY: Pantheon Books.
- George, A. (Translator, 1999). *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. NY: Penguin.
- Goldenberg, R. (1992). *Bound Up in the Bond of Life: Death and Afterlife in the Jewish Tradition*. In H. Obayashi, Ed., *Death and Afterlife*. Westport Connecticut: Praeger Press, pp.97-108.
- Hopkins, T. J. (1992). *Hindu Views of Death and Afterlife*. In H. Obayashi (Ed.) *Death and Afterlife: Perspectives of World Religions*. Westport Connecticut: Praeger Press, pp. 143-156.
- Kaufmann, Y. (1972). *The Religion of Israel: From Its Beginnings to the Babylonian Exile*. Berlin: Schocken Books.
- Mendenhall, G. E. (1992). *From Witchcraft to Justice: Death and Afterlife in the Old Testament*. In H. Obayashi (Ed.) *Death and Afterlife: Perspectives of World Religions*. Westport Connecticut: Praeger Press, pp. 67-82.
- Obayashi, H. (1992). *Death and Eternal Life in Christianity*. In H. Obayashi (Ed.) *Death and Afterlife: Perspectives of World Religions*. Westport Connecticut: Praeger Press, pp. 109-124.
- Ogilvie, D. M. (2011). *The anatomy of internalized beliefs*. (Unpublished ms. posted on course website).
- Osmond, R. (2003). *Imagining the Soul: A History*. UK: Stroud/Gloucestershire: Sutton Publishing Ltd.

- Pritchard, J. K. et al. (1999). Population growth of Human Y chromosomes: A study of Y chromosomes micro-satellites. *Molecular Biology and Evolution*, 16, pp. 1791-98.
- Sedikides, C., & Skowronski, J.J. (1997). The symbolic self in evolutionary context. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, Vol. 1, No 1, pp. 80-102.
- Shafer, B. E. (1991). Religions in Ancient Egypt. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Susskind, R. (2008). The Way of the World. NY; HarperCollins.
- Wade, Nicholas (2009). The faith instinct: How religion evolved and why it endures. NY: The Penguin Press.
- Woodburn, J. (1982) Social dimensions of death in four African hunting and gathering societies. In M. Bloch and J. Parry, eds., Death and the Regeneration of life. NY: Canbridge University Press, p. 188.
- Wright, R. (2009). The Evolution of God. NY: Little, Brown, and Company.